



**Leveraging adult students' connected knowing and prior community relationships to strengthen their community engagement, retention and success: What we know and need to know**

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**Summary**

Given nontraditional students' prior knowledge and networks, what role can service-learning play in

their academic success? While research on civic learning is often focused on young adults, nontraditional students will constitute the majority of college attendees in coming years (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Nontraditional students benefit substantially from “high impact practices” (Kuh, 2010). Unfortunately, they are less likely to have such opportunities (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). The exact causes for this disparity are not yet understood.

The previous research that has explored this topic found that nontraditional students appreciate engagement opportunities but are less enthusiastic than traditional students about them for their development (Rosenberg, Reed, Statham, & Rosing, 2012). One study found that designing such courses with this population in mind resulted in greater student satisfaction (Largent & Horinek, 2008). Interviews with adult students in another study suggest that they desire more options for community placements and the freedom to arrange their own projects (Reed, Rosing, Rosenberg, & Statham, 2011).

Nontraditional students have established identities and connections with their communities. Adults are more familiar with learning informally and value the knowledge, skills, and relationships developed. In light of this research, to what extent might adults leverage established networks and knowledge in service-learning courses? What is the role of maintaining connections to students’ prior learning in helping them transition to academic environments and contribute to academic success? How can these practices best be facilitated?

In terms of pedagogical approaches, helping adult students use existing networks might enable them to strengthen civic associations that can lead to lifetime engagement. This approach might also enable students to see themselves as participants in a democratic culture.

This symposium provides a literature review on service-learning with adult students, emerging research that identifies the benefits of service-learning, and effective methods for faculty.

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